

Rating the Packers: Week 8 at Falcons

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

Posted: Nov. 1, 2016

Green Bay - For 56 minutes Sunday, the Green Bay Packers were on track to post their first victory as an underdog since last November in Minnesota. They deserved to be leading by six points against the Atlanta Falcons at the Georgia Dome. Despite the absence of six starters, they were playing resourcefully and without a turnover. Then the defense fell apart on the Falcons' winning 75-yard drive after which the offense folded with the ball in Aaron Rodgers' hands and 31 seconds remaining.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 33-32 setback, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (4)

Trevor Davis played 36 of the 62 snaps on offense, just seven less than he played the entire season. Advertised as primarily a deep threat at California, he showed shiftiness in and out of his breaks in training camp to go with respectable hands and routes. His speed was unquestioned. On Sunday, he showed an ability to scramble routes and be where Rodgers wanted. He worked back up to the front pylon against nickel back Brian Poole for an 11-yard TD. He showed sideline awareness and improved footwork on a 6-yard catch, too. Going long is next. Davante Adams (52 at WR) made eight of his 12 receptions as a wide receiver, including the catch of the day on a shin-high throw for 14. He was carrying the ball loosely on his fumble, and was fortunate it went out of bounds. His blocking also was poor on a wall screen and running play that went for a loss. The Packers went back to Jordy Nelson (59) from No. 3 on the left as they did against Detroit and the result was 58 yards over the head of SS Keanu Neal. The rookie struggles in coverage and Nelson outran him, but it was surprising to see him caught from behind short of the end zone. As always, Nelson has a great knack in the end zone and knows how to make himself an inviting target. He also showed remarkable ball skills juggling and catching a bullet for 21 that actually was grazed by CB Desmond Trufant. He didn't explode upward on a catchable out cut, seemed to be on the ground all day and didn't block well. Jeff Janis (58) caught all four of his targets, including a 9-yard TD with FS Ricardo Allen in his face. He just can't keep rounding off his cuts like that. The debut for Geronimo Allison (19) was successful. He broke off an end-zone route against Allen like a seasoned veteran for the 4-yard TD. At 6 feet 3 ½ inches, he could be a red-zone threat. Richard Rodgers (26, including 11 with his hand down) lost playing time when coach Mike McCarthy employed a five-WR formation 11 times. After being targeted at least once in 36 straight games, he didn't have any. Despite reduced playing time, Rodgers was involved in two of the four "bad" runs and gave up two hurries.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3)

T.J. Lang was out there on sheer guts. Despite an ongoing hip condition, he insisted on playing but it was clear from the first play (a missed block) that he wasn't close to peak form. He was bending at the waist, playing high and seemed tentative around piles. He wasn't able to muscle people for the run or knock them around on double teams in pass pro. When the pain must have become too excruciating in the fourth quarter, he had to sit out for three plays. The drop-off between Lang and Don Barclay is significant so back in he came. Lang allowed two pressures and one "bad" run, an off day for him but more than adequate for someone else. His future availability is critical. Bryan Bulaga followed up a strong game against the Bears' best rusher (Willie Young) with another against Falcons ace Vic Beasley. Probably some of the reason why Atlanta began using Beasley to spy Rodgers was his inability to get much against Bulaga. Rodgers didn't have any luck coaxing the Falcons to jump with his hard count but he did get Bulaga. On the other side, David Bakhtiari continued to make it look easy with another solid game. Neither Lane Taylor nor JC Tretter was in top form. DE Adrian Clayborn's up-the-field sack was one of the two pressures allowed by Taylor. His pass set wasn't taking away the rusher's edge. When Taylor started setting more squarely he was fine. His limitations in space were evident on a screen for minus-6 when he couldn't get to speedy WLB De'Vondre Campbell. Tretter was involved in two of the three sacks.

QUARTERBACKS (4)

Aaron Rodgers saw how Philip Rivers, Russell Wilson and some of his other peers had been tearing up the Atlanta secondary. He did the same thing, attacking from the fourth play on with an exquisite 34-yard rainbow that Nelson turned into 58. He was money on third down and in the red zone (four TDs). Rather than fret about the players at the other five skill positions, he was just letting it rip to the open man. Coordinator Richard Smith blitzed on just 12.8 percent of dropbacks, and 10 times he rushed only three. He also shifted from zone to man coverage as the game wore on, and Rodgers made him pay with six scrambles for 60 yards, the second highest total of his career (counting playoffs). He also deftly faked and scored off zone-read action for two points, which will give opponents something else to consider. It was the closest he's looked to his MVP form in a long time. His accuracy on the move was excellent, and his keen powers of observation regarding opponent fatigue/substitution resulted in a penalty and a wasted timeout. He had the ball last, with by my estimate at least a 50 percent chance to produce a victory. Alas, his game fell apart with the outcome at hand. He got lucky when his sideline pass behind Allison wasn't intercepted by C.J. Goodwin. On the play before, he zinged high and slightly behind Nelson. Finally, if he and Adams connect on fourth down, the Packers have about a 54-yard FG attempt. The rules are made for quarterbacks to succeed in these clutch situations, and players without half of Rodgers' talent do it every Sunday. The Packers went out without a whimper. It was an awful way to end a promising performance.

RUNNING BACKS (2 ½)

Minus Eddie Lacy, James Starks and Ty Montgomery, McCarthy started out alternating Don Jackson (10) and Knile Davis (eight). Other than an old-fashioned iso or two that went nowhere, McCarthy trusted them on draw plays only. Watching average players such as Jackson and Davis makes you understand how good you must be to have success in pro football. Davis, who was released Monday, wasn't hitting it in there with any authority. In the second half, McCarthy went with FB Aaron Ripkowski (32) in a lot of one-back sets. On a 12-yard draw, he slipped away from DT Jonathan Babineaux at the line and then ran over Campbell for the last four. On Smith's only all-out blitz, he stoned MLB Deion Jones. McCarthy showed creativity by sticking Adams at RB (six snaps) for the first time. He circled from the backfield four times on receptions totaling 33 yards, looking almost as natural as Montgomery running routes. However, he was chopped down several times partly because of his upright running style.

DEFENSIVE LINE (3)

Letroy Guion's specialty is Dom Capers' 4-4 goal-line defense. When Falcons offensive coordinator Kyle Shanahan surprisingly elected to go jumbo vs. jumbo on two straight plays from the 1, Guion (25 of the 63 defensive snaps) got off fast and low and jammed it up for no gain. When Shanahan wised up and spread the formation, Devonta Freeman burst through a hole where Mike Daniels (38) had been displaced for the first rushing TD against the Packers since the opener. Otherwise, Guion was up and down. He wiped out a fine center, Alex Mack, on a reach block and illegal chop block that wasn't called. At other times, Mack and undersized but aggressive guards Andy Levitre and Chris Chester did away with Guion. Rookie Kenny Clark (25) played the same amount as Guion and was OK. The only 2 ½ pressures by the unit came from Daniels, including a bull rush sack against Levitre in 2.7 seconds. Daniels sustains his extreme level of effort throughout every game. He still tends to get out of control, however, as when his spin rush enabled Matt Ryan to scramble for 10. Mike Pennel (13) needs to be more consistent, too. His loss of gap control helped let little Terron Ward explode through for 26. Dean Lowry (two) is playing with more explosiveness each week. When the rush got tired and faded away, Christian Ringo was waved in for the first of his four snaps with two minutes left.

LINEBACKERS (1)

The Falcons took full advantage of ILBs Blake Martinez (41) and Jake Ryan (47). Joe Thomas (22) probably should have played more; certainly he should have been in Ryan's position on the 11-yard game-winner to Mohamed Sanu. Wide receivers, tight ends and running backs, it made no difference. Matt Ryan found business good in the short to intermediate zones. Martinez was late in coverage three or four times. He was late reacting on some runs, then attacked the 26-yard run by Ward but missed the tackle in the backfield. Martinez came in way too high and, along with Jake Ryan, missed the tackle on Julio Jones' 12-yard reception. On the quick screen to Freeman for a 5-yard TD, there was a mixup between Martinez and Ryan. When Ryan lined up late and too far inside, he charged at a bad angle and then Martinez overpursued as Freeman scored easily. Ryan was aggressive against the run, especially on the goal-line, but then didn't seem to see Freeman on his 1-yard TD. Martinez has to stop biting on play-action fakes. His ability to play sideline to sideline against the run wasn't there, either. On the outside, the five rotating players totaled merely 4 ½ pressures in a job poorly done against the Falcons quarterback. He's a pure pocket passer, but this bunch still couldn't get home. Clay Matthews was sorely missed. Wonder if Shanahan would have called the naked pitch on fourth and 1 that gained 17 around Nick Perry (50) if that had been Matthews? Perry was tough against the run but had a disappointing day rushing against tackles Jake Matthews and Ryan Schraeder. Replacing Matthews, Julius Peppers (46, including 36 at OLB) played pretty well. Kyler Fackrell (19) was closer than the others to Ryan but tried to be too aggressive on the edge against the run and was outflanked a few times. Datone Jones (23, nine at OLB) actually jumped first on the third-and-5 penalty that was charged to Fackrell. Jones had a pair of knockdowns but also a 15-yard flag for roughing Ryan.

Secondary (3 ½)

Dom Capers continued to sit on his hands, protecting his backup cornerbacks with tame four-man rushes and additional people in coverage. His blitz rate was merely 9.5 percent. Obviously, Capers would try to prevent Julio Jones from beating him. It worked, with LaDarius Gunter (60) bumping him underneath knowing that Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (63) lay in wait behind them. Gunter did exactly what he was asked and equipped to do. Jones destroys teams by running through zones. Gunter prevented that at all costs, penalty (he had one for 24) or not. He scratched and clawed his way to a solid showing, no doubt helped by the ankle injury that limited Jones for the last 2 ½ quarters. On the other side, Demetri Goodson (61) didn't get the help he expected on the 47-yard bomb to Taylor Gabriel for a TD but it's still his job to get the ball out. Goodson and Gunter tackled pretty well, although Goodson can't allow Ward to deke him and get outside on his 26-yard run. Clinton-Dix was late moving into position on his only blitz. Also, he was in position to make a game-saving pick but couldn't do it. Nickel Micah Hyde (62) is in spots to make plays but doesn't quite get there. Morgan Burnett (63) was all right.

KICKERS (4)

Jacob Schum hit the ball better than he has since his exhibition debut in Kansas City. His three-punt averages were 54.3 yards (gross), 38.3 (net) and 4.80 seconds (hang time). Despite one mishit, Mason Crosby's five-kickoff averages were 70.6 and 3.66. His only FG attempt from 29 was good. We'll never know how he would have fared from 60 or thereabouts in the final seconds.

SPECIAL TEAMS (1 ½)

Trevor Davis made Matt Boshier pay on a 49-yard punt with just 4.25 hang time. He fielded it moving forward and seemed to surprise three or four oncoming defenders with his burst. The result was a 55-yard return, the Packers' longest since Hyde went the same distance in Game 16 of 2014. Kentrell Brice had a pair of penalties.

STARS OF THE GAME: Trevor Davis, LaDarius Gunter, Bryan Bulaga

OVERALL RATING: 3.5 footballs